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Norman Conti

Rick McCown

Maureen R. O'Brien

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Dr. Norman Conti,
Dr. Rick McCown,
Dr. Maureen O'Brien

SPIRITAN MISSION AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AT DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY: THE ELSINORE BENNU THINK TANK FOR RESTORATIVE JUSTICE¹

Dr. Norman Conti

Dr. Norman Conti is a professor of sociology at Duquesne University, specializing in police socialization, social psychology, and restorative justice.

He is the coordinator of Duquesne's Social Justice Association and a member of the national steering committee for the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. His work has appeared in a number of journals including *The American Sociologist*, *Dialogues in Social Justice*, *The Federal Sentencing Reporter*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Journal of Public Scholarship in Higher Education*.

Dr. Rick McCown

Prof. Rick McCown is Professor of Education and the Pierre Schouver, C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Mission at Duquesne University.

His research focuses on teaching-learning systems through the lenses of restorative justice, public scholarship, and improvement inquiry.

His texts on educational psychology have been adopted by universities in over forty countries.

Dr. Maureen R. O'Brien

Dr. Maureen O'Brien is an associate professor of theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Her research interests focus in practical theology, religious education and the education of lay ministers. She has conducted field study in West Africa on the role of catechists there, as well as ongoing research projects on Spiritan educators and Spiritan pedagogy.

She currently serves on the Education Committee for the U.S. Province.

1. Listed alphabetically, the think tank members who contributed to this article include: Cathleen Appelt, Ralph Malakki Bolden, William Cleary, Norman Conti, Sharnay Hearn Davis, Luci-Jo DiMaggio, Craig Elias, Joshua Ellsworth, Deanna Fracul, Elaine Frantz, Lou Gentile, Anne Marie Hansen, Jalila Jefferson-Bullock, Rick McCown, Jaime Munoz, Maureen O'Brien, Jotham Parsons, Lori Pompa, Juel L. Smith, James Swindal.

*Aware
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University.*

INTRODUCTION

The Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice at Duquesne University (EBTT) is comprised of activists, artists, police officers, political leaders, professors, returning citizens, and students who have come together in a prison, on campus, or through virtual meetings almost every Friday morning since the summer of 2013 to share their ideas and find partners for turning theory into practice on behalf of those incarcerated or formerly incarcerated.¹ EBTT members are constantly seeking to address the intractable damage of white supremacy within our community and ourselves. Their activities include: bringing police recruits into prisons to learn with incarcerated men; hosting events to honor victims of violent crime; publishing a book of essays written by our incarcerated members; pursuing grant funding; delivering food to senior high-rises during a pandemic; offering writing workshops; and collectively authoring academic articles such as this one.

Think Tank members, including this essay's co-authors, have become aware of deep resonances between our work and the Spiritan ethos as embodied at Duquesne University. This article is an attempt to recognize the work of the EBTT as an ongoing evolution of what our Spiritan forebears began and what our Spiritan contemporaries continue. The Spiritans are committed as "advocates, supporters, and the defenders" of the oppressed against all who oppress them. Spiritans bridge the gap between the Christian narrative and social justice by serving displaced and trafficked people, survivors of torture, incarcerated people, and at-risk youth, as well as impoverished and under-served communities. Further, the EBTT and Spiritan mission are powerful expressions of the praxis-oriented pedagogy of eminent Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

This article will unfold key developments in EBTT's history and their strong integration with these two streams of influence. We note the genesis of The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program at Duquesne, the formation of the EBTT at the State Correctional Institution in Pittsburgh, its eventual re-establishment on campus after the prison's closure and, most recently, its move online during the COVID-19 pandemic. EBTT members are committed to collaborative community efforts as a way for people damaged by circumstance and systems of oppression to remake themselves, recognizing that remade people are needed to restore a broken society. Through interactions characterized by reciprocity and the drive for personal and societal transformation, the EBTT can be interpreted

Spiritans' solidarity with the oppressed has drawn them to men, women, and children trapped within carceral systems in various parts of the world.

Inside-Out conducts university courses within correctional settings.

as offering a unique blending of Spiritan and Freirean adult educational practices for empowerment and liberation.

THE INSIDE-OUT PRISON EXCHANGE PROGRAM

With the global incarceration crisis of the last few decades, Spiritans' solidarity with the oppressed has drawn them to men, women, and children trapped within carceral systems in various parts of the world.² The Spiritan focus on ministry with those who are, or have been, incarcerated, has also powerfully manifested itself in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Duquesne University is a Catholic university in the Spiritan tradition, which has inherited the legacy of Des Places and Libermann. The university is religiously motivated in serving students, and seeks to inspire its graduates "to work collaboratively to build a more just and verdant world"³ through the Spiritan objective of "making young people aware of the problems of poverty and unjust structures in their society and the world at large."⁴

Spiritans' mission, and the University it fostered, created a rich environment for nurturing a powerful movement that emerged at the end of the twentieth century: Inside-Out. In 1997, Lori Pompa, an instructor at Temple University in Philadelphia, began "The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program," based on a suggestion from a man serving life in the Pennsylvania prison system. Inside-Out conducts university courses within correctional settings. Enrollees include traditional college students and an equivalent number of learners selected from prison populations. One of the program's goals is a shift in the consciousness of each participant, with reducing the stigmatization of incarcerated people central to the experiential process. Courses begin with a discussion of labels and a recommendation that negative terms, such as "inmate," be exchanged for "inside student," while the rest of the class is referred to as "outside students." Starting with this relabeling, participants start to realize that neither group can reduce the other to the one-dimensional image previously assumed. As students interact over the course of a semester, their views of each other change. Incarcerated persons no longer appear as the misfits and monsters portrayed in popular culture, but as people with lives and families beyond prison walls. College students become something more than "children of privilege" incapable of understanding why individuals succumb to the culture of street crime. In time, initial changes in how people see one another af-

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fect how participants view themselves, their futures, and their potential impact on society. Most Inside-Out instructors will readily attest that it is, by far, the single most engaged learning process in which they have ever taken part. What has often been most surprising are the many levels of learning that take place—people learning about themselves, about other people, about how they are both different and alike, about communication and working through conflict, and about the systems that impact their lives—and their relationship to those systems, as individuals and as a community.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's pedagogy offers an important framework for interpreting the nature of such deep, multilayered, and lasting learning. In Freire's terms, the pedagogical dynamics of Inside-Out can be considered intentional *conscientização* ("conscientization") that emphasizes not only personal agency, but also the possibilities of mutual transformation through mutual learning. "Education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as capable of knowing—of knowing that they know and of knowing that they don't."⁵ Through creating a space in which insiders and outsiders learn about one another through engaging together in learning activities, they examine and change their perspectives on the "other," acknowledging that each group's perspective is insufficient and that freedom comes through dialectical engagement.

As Freire would insist, true *praxis* is accomplished only through the interplay of "word" and "work"—reflective processes of educational study and dialogue must be accompanied by action, or else our conversation becomes mere verbalism.⁶ Faithful to this imperative, the Inside-Out curriculum includes a number of modules on restorative justice (i.e., a model of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior and then repairing that harm in a process that includes all stakeholders). Students begin with a series of self-reflection exercises in which they reflect upon their experiences of causing and experiencing harm. They are asked to consider moments when they suffered as well as moments when they caused suffering. They summarize how they felt and what they lost in these experiences into single word responses that are anonymously listed before the class. Students then make con-

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nections and recognize the similarities between both victimization and harming others. In this moment, they realize that incarcerated offenders are frequently the victims of some individual or social harm.

From this awakening, they move on to case studies of individual offenders presented in narrative form. Students are asked to come up with some means for dealing with the harms described in the narratives in a world without a criminal justice system (i.e., harms caused as well as suffered by the characters in the case studies). This exercise is useful for separating the concepts of justice and punishment. Once the students realize that justice does not necessitate punishment, they begin reading on the topic of restorative justice in order to participate in an exercise that develops one of the case studies into a role-play of a "peacemaking circle" in which a number of students are given character backgrounds and asked to use them as a grounding for their parts in the activity.

These class projects function as vivid examples of how restorative justice can be used to resolve real world problems, offering the opportunity for the deep dialogue and imaginative re-creating of interpersonal and societal relationships that lead to transformative liberation. In such efforts we also hear the echo of the Spiritan Rule of Life: "We count the following as constitutive parts of our mission of evangelization: the 'integral liberation' of people, action for justice and peace, and participation in development. . . . In order to contribute effectively to promoting justice, we make every effort to analyze situations, to lay bare the relationship of individual cases to structural causes."⁷

In the summer of 2007, Norman Conti, a sociology professor at Duquesne University, set up Duquesne's first Inside-Out course at SCI-Cresson, a correctional facility in Cresson Township near Altoona, Pennsylvania. Although the prison was a two-hour drive from campus, he and sixteen dedicated students leapt at the opportunity. Following that pilot, Norm next taught several classes at the Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh, and then moved the program to SCI-Pittsburgh, a correctional facility in Pittsburgh, for two semesters.

The University integrated these classes into its curriculum as part of the Justitia Learning Community, established around the guiding principles of justice and community engagement.⁸ Since its inception, the Justitia community has functioned as a primary driver for Inside-Out at Duquesne.

Various combinations of insiders and outsiders (including returning citizens, i.e., those returning from incarceration to society) come together for joint projects that continue their commitment to the liberating, reflection-action dynamic of praxis.

ELSINORE BENNU THINK TANK FOR RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Fundamental to the Inside-Out movement has been the creation of think tanks, through which various combinations of insiders and outsiders (including returning citizens, i.e., those returning from incarceration to society) come together for joint projects that continue their commitment to the liberating, reflection-action dynamic of praxis.⁹ In the Pittsburgh context, this germinated as a core group of men within SCI-Pittsburgh enrolled in all three of the Inside-Out classes offered through Duquesne. In 2013, wanting to push the collaborative learning model even further, the men, together with Norm Conti, formed an Inside-Out think tank to meet weekly and develop policy solutions to address the carceral state and the injustice of race. They named it the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice. In the collaborative spirit of the group, “Elsinore” (the cursed castle in Hamlet) was Norm’s idea, and “Bennu” (an Egyptian symbol of rebirth) was proposed by Ralph Malakki Bolden, an inside member. Most of these founding members had been convicted of murder. The oldest two had been incarcerated since the 1970s and the youngest for just over a decade. While all of them passionately hoped for eventual parole or commutation, none had concrete grounds to ever expect release. Nevertheless, they saw one of their major roles as supporting other incarcerated men in their preparations for reentry. Duquesne students, other faculty, and community members regularly came to these weekly meetings inside the facility, many of them ultimately joining the think tank themselves.

From 2013 to 2017, the think tank produced many programs, publications, and events, all of which were meant to foster the recognition of the common humanity of those inside and outside carceral facilities, and to use the mutual recognition to build a collaborative process of restorative justice. This took the form of programming inside SCI-Pittsburgh; for example, the EBTT developed events like a “Victim’s Day” in which men inside that prison could come together to consider how they had victimized others, and also, how they themselves had suffered victimization, with the goal of brainstorming strategies to stop this cycle. They sponsored the showing of *Etty*, a powerful play about the Holocaust, inside the facility.¹⁰

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Members also sent their voices over prison walls through projects like an art fair at Duquesne's gallery space featuring work created by the incarcerated, and a book of writings by EBTT members called *Life Sentences: Writings from an American Prison* (Belt Press, 2019).

When SCI-Pittsburgh closed in 2017 and inside members were moved to facilities throughout Western Pennsylvania, the EBTT took on a new form, meeting outside of a prison setting, at Duquesne University itself, and bringing together returning citizens with activists, artists, police officers, political leaders, professors and students. At the same time, three of the original inside members, with the help of Gannon and Mercyhurst Universities, formed a new think tank within SCI-Albion in northwestern Pennsylvania. As the New Destiny Think Tank for Restorative Justice, they have created a series of events and programs focused on juvenile offenders and support for young people in general.

POLICE TRAINING INSIDE-OUT

One of our most ambitious EBTT initiatives is a learning exchange with incarcerated men and Pittsburgh Police officers. The six original inside members at SCI-Pittsburgh and Norm spent years developing an ancillary curriculum for police academy training. The three-credit course, which uses a modified version of the Inside-Out curriculum, brings police recruits together with incarcerated men to study criminal justice policy. Adding this new curriculum to traditional academy training is intended to help recruits develop a more nuanced professional vision. For the incarcerated students, their coursework also empowers them to see the humanity in a group of people—the police—whom they had seen only as adversaries. The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police partnered with the EBTT on this course, and now, working with Duquesne University and the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, their police recruits go through it as a regular part of their academy training.

Police Training Inside-Out (PTI-O) is a response to the widely accepted finding that traditional training methods are failing new officers and their departments. Traditional training promotes the type of us vs. them mentality that undermines the best efforts of law enforcement within the communities they serve. PTI-O approaches policing from a social problems perspective, emphasizing the problems that police respond to, the problems

Their excitement becomes visible as they take part in the joy of learning across their preconceived boundaries.

that they create, the problems that they suffer from, and how their professional vision contributes to each of these problems. The curriculum allows the two groups to see each other—and themselves—as people with vested interests in their shared communities.

Recruits tend to enter our classroom with a set of such us vs. them biases toward the incarcerated, having heard from some senior officers that participation in this sort of thing would make them “soft” and could be dangerous. They encounter their inside classmates and, after a series of icebreaker activities, their excitement becomes visible as they take part in the joy of learning across their preconceived boundaries. As SCI-Pittsburgh was closing, the Pittsburgh police department made PTI-O a permanent component of its academy training and agreed to send all future recruits to course meetings at another institution. Moreover, administrators from a number of local facilities were clamoring for the program, and EBTT members have since facilitated six PTI-O courses at SCI-Fayette, a facility one hour south of Pittsburgh.

A NEW INITIATIVE: THE HOUSE OF LIFE

One of the founding members of our think tank, Ralph Malakki Bolden, maintains an interest in Egyptian mythology that brought us the Bennu (a symbol of rebirth) in our name, as well as a number of other important guiding metaphors for our work. The Duat, the underworld (i.e., the realm of the dead) has become essential for our understanding of the potential that men and women facing life sentences have for changing the world.¹¹ The Duat is a place of judgment where souls cross over to learn, face challenges, and potentially be assessed for resurrection. Some souls become trapped in the Duat, providing an opportunity for them to serve as teachers to others in their ordeals. This is an obvious parallel to the struggle accepted by many people facing life sentences without the possibility of parole. Through the adversities of confinement, the lives of these men and women gain greater meaning and allow them to make a positive impact on the larger world. The Duat-like existence of a life sentence, in Freirean consciousness, could easily become a realm of “silence” for those fatalistically resigned to it. Instead, it has become a “generative theme” through which the incarcerated people achieve a kind of liberation through their teaching and mentoring role.¹²

The incarcerated people achieve a kind of liberation through their teaching and mentoring role.

This metaphor is also observed in the widely-praised work

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of The Fortune Society, in New York City.¹³ Inspired by a series of dialogues following a performance of John Herbert's *The Fortune in Men's Eyes* in the late 1960s, a group of people impacted by the criminal justice system began a campaign for public education, human rights, and direct services for returning citizens and their families. Since the late 1960s, The Fortune Society has grown into one of our nation's premier reentry services organizations, serving 7,000 of New York City's returning citizens every year. The most tangible element of their success can be observed in their temporary and permanent housing facilities in West Harlem, which accept men and women upon release. Housed in a Gothic building that had once been a girls' school, staffed in part by people with a history of incarceration, and fondly referred to as "the Castle," the facility neither looks nor feels like a conventional half-way house or reentry center. Additionally, The Fortune Society built an environmentally sustainable, mixed-use building to house justice-involved citizens as well as community members facing homelessness. The staff helps to mediate between landlords and formerly incarcerated people to ensure access to safe, stable, and affordable housing for those leaving their facilities. Moreover, the Academy holds Thursday night community meetings very similar to our own think tank meetings.

The EBTT has drafted a proposal to create our own version of The Fortune Society's endeavor that would make greater use of our deep connections to both those who have served life and universities. Malakki once noted that major ancient Egyptian cities included temples called "The House of Life," essentially libraries, staffed by high priests, containing all of the accumulated cultural knowledge. We are offering a contemporary reimagining of these sites as brick-and-mortar think tanks that would house commuted "Lifers"—formerly incarcerated people whose life sentences have been commuted—and serve as key impact points for community development initiatives undertaken in partnership with universities, local government, and other civically-engaged organizations. These commuted Lifers would also work as frontline activists in collaboration with the committed men and women on the "inside," who remain teachers with those who are currently passing through a carceral experience.

There are Lifers on both sides of prison walls who are as committed to ending mass incarceration as were abolitionists to ending the horrors of slavery.¹⁴ The House of Life would empower

hundreds of life-sentenced and long-term sentenced men and women toward this goal. With or without an eye toward their own potential commutation, they would work through this initiative to actively recruit and educate the most promising of their shorter-term fellow incarcerated citizens in preparation for eventual careers on the outside. The House of Life would be a further step toward formalizing and therefore strengthening the role that so many Lifers already play within prisons.

CONCLUSION: RESONANCE WITH SPIRITAN MISSION

Duquesne University's version of Inside-Out, along with EBTT and the proposed House of Life, offer abundant evidence of a unique combination of Spiritan and Freirean sensibilities in service of education and justice. This is especially evident in the following dimensions:

The Spiritan approach to mission and Freirean methodology come together.

An open-ended, missional priority for liberation from oppression. Core to Spiritan mission is openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and led by these promptings, their founders and members continually have promoted efforts to enculturate the Christian gospel in diverse settings. Since this is a gospel proclaiming "glad tidings to the poor" and "liberation to captives," Spiritans are drawn into those settings where great poverty and oppression exist. Spiritan lore abounds with stories of congregation members setting out into new endeavors with minimal planning and resources, zealous to serve.

One such setting are the favelas (low-income slum neighborhoods) of Brazil where the Spiritan approach to mission and Freirean methodology come together. One Spiritan, Pat Clarke, became friends with Paulo Freire in 1974. He went to Brazil two years later as a newly ordained priest and lived in one of these favelas, Vila Prudente, in Sao Paulo city. Pat remembered Freire's advice, "Don't begin with ready-made answers and ready-made projects. Be a fly on the wall until you know what the people are talking about. Then use your teacher-learner skills to help them become empowered."¹⁵ Rather than responding to the immediate demands for a soup kitchen and food handouts, "Pat hit upon the idea that transformation had to begin not only from without, but also and fundamentally, from within."¹⁶ He recognized "that culture was food too. Food for the heart and the soul." He founded a Center for Culture and the Arts, now over forty years in existence, providing an oasis of affirmation for the youth of Vila Prudente.

The inherent dignity and life-situation of each participant is honored, while recognizing that the transformational callings of various groups will differ.

Here they learn self-respect and respect for others and develop a sense of dignity and self-worth.

The Center's artists have exhibited in galleries throughout Brazil, as well as in Hong Kong, the USA, and Ireland. "They are able to tap the creative mystery that is in everybody, the dream to be able to believe in and feel and express their worth as human beings."¹⁷ Initiatives such as Inside-Out at Duquesne, the EBT²T and the House of Life show a similar energy and determination to focus on areas of greatest need and allow creative efforts to grow organically through the participation of diverse stakeholders.

Praxis-oriented interplay of reflection, dialogue, study and action. Duquesne University offers many opportunities for community-engaged learning and action partnerships.¹⁸ As evident in the initiatives discussed in this article, educational models that bring together incarcerated people and returning citizens with university faculty and students can yield rich fruits. Freire offered a hopeful vision in which revolutionary leader-educators could sponsor "educational projects" to be "carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them."¹⁹ In so doing, the pedagogy of the oppressed could move from its initial stage of liberating the oppressed themselves to a second stage in which it "becomes a pedagogy of all [people] in the process of permanent liberation."²⁰ The initiatives described in this article embody such efforts.

Creation of educational spaces in which "privileged" and "marginalized" people learn from one another and become open to transformation. In a 1983 conversation with United States religious educators, Freire spoke of the fatalism that often characterizes the ideology of the "non-poor" as much as the "poor" – and of its twin, despair – with cynicism and immobilization as frequent outcomes.²¹ Spiritan and Freirean-influenced strategies for pedagogy and action offer a way beyond such immobilization, as they are characterized by efforts to create spaces of hospitality and mutuality "in which obedience to truth is practiced."²² Inside-Out and the EBT²T are powerful examples of such spaces.

In the legacy of Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, the inherent dignity and life-situation of each participant is honored, while recognizing that the transformational callings of various groups will differ.²³ A strong culture is fostered in

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group meetings of mutual welcome and attentive listening to each person's contributions. As practiced within the Spiritan ethos of Duquesne University and through EBTT's initiatives, Freire's hope in the growth of mutual love can be concretely realized: "Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence."²⁴ And in the messy, dialectical exchanges that result, the effect is an effort toward Freire's epistemological vision, deeply consonant with the Christian Gospel's hopeful message as Spiritans seek to embody it.

As participants engage together in critical interpretation of the world as they find it, a new world becomes imaginable. "With the advent of the existence men and women created with the materials life provided them, it became impossible for them to be present in the world without reference to a tomorrow."²⁵ Such a hoped-for tomorrow finds a deep echo in Jesus' invitation toward the Kingdom of God.

*Dr. Norman Conti,
Dr. Rick McCown,
Dr. Maureen O'Brien,
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh.*

ENDNOTES

1. If interested in attending our meetings please contact: ebtt100@gmail.com.
2. A notable example is that for the past twenty years, Spiritans have devoted themselves to improving the health and living conditions of, and providing education and training initiatives for, the roughly 2,000 people in Arba Minch prison, in the southwestern part of Ethiopia. They have applied their deep commitment to grounding their ministry in the lived experience, dignity, and initiative of those they serve. Another is the Spiritans' work in Taiwan with two prisons in the cities of Hsinchu and Taichung. Whereas in Ethiopia, the focus was on meeting the existential need to improve prison living conditions, in Taiwan, the focus is on meeting the existential needs of those exiting prison, helping them with accommodation, finding work, providing accompaniment and friendship. See O'Donnell, Ian. "African prison could teach us a thing or two." *The Irish Times*, August 30, 2016. Also see O'Leary, Seán, C.S.Sp. "Prison Ministry in Taiwan", *Kibanda*, Brussels: European Centre for Cooperation and Development, March 2020.
3. <https://www.duq.edu/academics/community-engaged-teaching-and-research/what-we-do-community-engaged-teaching-and-learning>
4. Spiritan General Chapter XVIII, Maynooth, Ireland, 1998, 102.
5. Freire, Paulo. (2004). *Pedagogy of Indignation*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 15.

6. Freire, Paulo. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press, especially 75-76.
7. *Spiritan Rule of Life*, 14 and 14.1, <https://d2y1pz2y630308.cloudfront.net/22800/documents/2019/5/SRL13.pdf>
8. At Duquesne University, "Learning Communities" are required for all first-year students in the College of Liberal Arts. Each community is organized around a core theme and its student members take three courses together in their first semester. Course instructors design coordinated learning outcomes and class activities to emphasize the theme and offer interdisciplinary connections. Some form of community engagement is typically required.
9. For more on Inside-Out think tanks, see Pompa, Lori. (2013). "One Brick at a Time: The Power and Possibility of Dialogue Across the Prison Wall." *The Prison Journal* 93 (2): 130ff.
10. <http://www.ettyplay.org>.
11. <http://anthropology.msu.edu/anp455-fs14/2014/10/28/duat/>
12. Freire (1970), especially 97.
13. <https://fortunesociety.org>.
14. Tyrone Werts, a central figure in Inside-Out and commuted Lifer offers a premier example of this sort of career. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB6Hzu2hBio>.
15. Clark, P. (2009). Centro Cultural: The Soul of the Slum. *Spiritan Magazine*, 33 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tclvol33/iss1/7>. 9.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.10.
18. See, for example, listings of active partnerships supported by the Duquesne University Center for Community-Engaged Teaching and Research at <https://duq.edu/academics/community-engaged-teaching-and-research/partnerships>.
19. Freire (1970), 40.
20. Ibid.
21. Evans, Alice Frazer; Robert A. Evans; and William Bean Kennedy. (1994). *Pedagogies for the Non-Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. 222.
22. Palmer, Parker J. (1983). *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: HarperOne. 69.
23. Norman Conti and Elaine Frantz offer reflections on the movement for Insiders from "humiliation" to "humility" and the necessary co-movement of Outsiders like themselves from "hubris to humility" in "Infinite Space and Common Ground," 134. From Chaney, John R., and Joni Schwartz, eds. (2017), *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens: Counterstories and Counterspaces*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
24. Freire (1970), 79-80.
25. Freire (2004), 18 (emphasis added).

